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SUBJECT: CULTURAL CENTERS

REFS: STATE 29571: NEW DELHI 2239

1. DURING MY MARCH 3 MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER GANDHI, I RAISED THE "NOT SO PLEASANT" ISSUE OF IMPENDING CLOSURE OF FIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTERS.
2. SINCE IT EVIDENT SHE DID NOT HAVE COMPLETE BACKGROUND, I EXPLAINED BRIEFLY BUT THOROUGHLY THE NATURE OF CASE, AND HISTORY OF GOI PRIOR APPROVAL AND SUBSEQUENT REASSURANCES CONCERNING CENTERS. I EXPRESSED GREAT CONCERN AT ADVERSE POLITICAL EFFECTS IN INDIA AND U.S., NOTED UNFAVORABLE INTERPRETATION IN US AND INDIAN PRESS, AND CITED ACTION AS SERIOUS IRRITANT IN BILATERAL RELATIONS. I NOTED THESE EFFECTS WERE EXACERBATED BY ALLEGATIONS OF IMPROPRIETY ON U.S. SIDE BROACHED IN PRESS AND PARLIAMENT IN MANNER UNCUSTOMARY BETWEEN FRIENDLY GOVERNMENTS. I QUOTED LOK SABHA MEMBER, S. K. TAPURIAH (SWATANTRA), STATEMENT IN PARLIAMENT FEBRUARY 26 DURING DISCUSSION ON CULTURAL CENTERS, QTE THIS WOULD PROBABLY TEACH THE AMERICANS AND THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR HERE A LESSON THAT THEY SHOULD NOT GO ALL OUT TO SUPPORT THE PRIME MINISTER AND HER COLLEAGUES THE WAY THEY HAVE BEEN DOING AND THAT ALL THAT THEY WOULD GET FOR IT IS A KICK IN THEIR PANTS. IT IS VERY RIGHT THAT IT IS GIVEN TO THEM. UNQTE.
3. WHILE MRS. GANDHI SMILED NERVOUSLY, I TOLD HER SECRETARY ROGERS AND I HAD ASKED FOREIGN MINISTER DINESH SINGH FOR CHAPTER AND VERSE CONCERNING ANY EVIDENCE OF IMPROPER ACTIVITY BY AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTERS. I SAID HAD TALKED TO FOREIGN MINISTER, WHO, WHILE NOT DEFENDING METHODS, DID DEFEND CLOSURE ACTION. I SAID I FIND THIS DIFFICULT TO SQUARE WITH ASSERTION HE DOES NOT WISH TO CURTAIL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES. I OFFERED MRS. GANDHI A COPY OF SECRETARY ROGERS' MESSAGE TO DINESH SINGH (STATE 29569) WHICH SHE TOOK AND READ.
4. I TOLD MRS. GANDHI THAT DINESH HAD STATED THAT AFTER RECEIPT OF EMBASSY RESPONSE (DELIVERED MARCH 3) TO MEA NOTE OF FEBRUARY 10, GOI CULTURAL PEOPLE WOULD BE IN TOUCH WITH US. I ADDED WE ARE NOT WEDDED TO ANY ONE FORM BUT STILL HOPE SOMETHING CAN BE WORKED OUT, PERHAPS ALONG LINES OF BRITISH COUNCIL. I CITED MY VISITS TO THREE CULTURAL CENTERS AND PERSONAL ASSURANCE OF THEIR NON-PROPAGANDISTIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES.
5. MRS. GANDHI SAID SHE QUITE HONESTLY NOT IN TOUCH WITH CULTURAL CENTER ISSUE. SHE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT SOME PATTERN MUST BE EVOLVED, AND THAT THIS MUCH HAD BEEN RAISED WITH HER AND SHE HAD AGREED. THERE IS A PROBLEM, SHE SAID, OF ONE COUNTRY BEING ALLOWED TO DO SOMETHING AND ANOTHER NOT, AND IN THIS REGARD CITED USSR WITHOUT CLARIFICATION. WHEN I SAID THE TRIVANDRUM EPISODE APPEARED THE ORIGIN OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS, SHE AGREED TO EXTENT IT HAD FOCUSSED PUBLIC ATTENTION ON ISSUE.
6. IN CONCLUSION, I SAID WE WISHED TO COMMENCE PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN OUR TWO GOVERNMENTS, LOOKING TO EXPLORE CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVES FOR THE CULTURAL CENTERS THAT WOULD MEET GOI AND US REQUIREMENTS. I ADDED THAT 73 DAYS REMAINING UNDER 90-DAY CLOSURE DEADLINE STIPULATED BY MEA WOULD HARDLY BE SUFFICIENT TIME TO EVOLVE CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVE. ACCORDINGLY WE WOULD TAKE IT AS A GOOD SIGN IF THAT DEADLINE WERE SET ASIDE OR RELAXED. OTHER HAND, I ADDED THAT WE COULD, OF COURSE, EFFECT CLOSURE WITHIN THE STIPULATED PERIOD. SHE NOTED THAT SHE UNABLE TO SAY MUCH AT THIS JUNCTURE AND WISHED TO CONSULT WITH HER MINISTER.
7. WHILE LEAVING, I NOTED THERE SOME EDITORIAL COMMENT IN INDIAN PRESS TO EFFECT ALL FOREIGN CULTURAL ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE BANISHED. MRS. GANDHI REACTED THAT SHE DIDN'T THINK THAT WOULD BE RIGHT. SEEMING TO AGREE WITH MY OBSERVATION THAT MORE, NOT LESS, CULTURAL EXCHANGE IS DESIRABLE, SHE NOTED THAT TAKES MANY FORMS, INCLUDING FIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS OF INDIAN CULTURE WITH WHOM SHE HAD EVIDENTLY MET THAT MORNING.
7. COMMENT: MY IMPRESSION IS MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS RECEIVED ENDORSEMENT OF PRIME MINISTER'S SECRETARIAT TO REVAMPED CULTURAL CENTER POLICY WITH ONLY VERY GENERAL INVOLVEMENT OF PRIME MINISTER. SUBSEQUENTLY, MINISTRY HAS BEEN CAUGHT UP IN SUBSTANTIVELY UNCOMPROMISING AND PROCEDURALLY ARBITRARY BUREAUCRATIC OVER-REACTION. PRIME MINISTER SEEMED SENSITIVE TO APPEARANCE OF BALANCED POSTURE (IMPLICITLY BETWEEN U.S. AND USSR), AWARE OF GROUND SWELL OF INDIAN PRESS COMMENTARY GENERALLY FAVORABLE TO AMERICAN CENTERS, PERSONALLY WELL DISPOSED TOWARD INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL EXCHANGE, AND IMPRESSED BY SECRETARY

ROGERS AND MY COMMENTS ABOUT THE APPROACH TAKEN BY THE MINISTRY.

8. I EXPECT THE FOREIGN MINISTER WILL BE HEARING FROM MRS. GANDHI AT LEAST ABOUT MINISTRY'S METHODS. WHETHER THIS WILL SUFFICE TO MODERATE GOI LINE SUFFICIENTLY TO PERMIT DISCUSSION ALONG THE LINES SUGGESTED BY ME REMAINS TO BE SEEN.
KEATING

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